

# Early Muslim Relations with Christianity

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## Introduction

On the shore of the Golden Horn, outside the ancient land defences of Constantinople, is one of the most revered places in the whole of the Islamic world. It is the tomb of the Prophet's standard bearer Ayyub al-Ansari, who was killed while taking part in an attack on the city in about 678 AD. His grave quickly became a place of veneration for Muslims and Christians alike, and a report from the thirteenth century relates that whenever they suffered drought the Byzantines would open Ayyub's tomb and pray there, usually with success.

It may be surprising to think of Christians invoking the soul of a dead enemy. But if this report is correct, they evidently regarded Ayyub as a saint who dwelt in the nearer presence of the God they themselves worshipped. Their Muslim contemporaries would have understood their actions perfectly. For they held that Christians possessed some grasp upon true beliefs, even though they had long ago lost the purity of their original revelation. They looked upon their neighbours with a mixture of understanding and disgust and throughout the early Islamic centuries relations between the faiths remained a blend of tolerance and hostility.

## Muslim Respect for Christians

The Christian population within the Muslim empire was extremely numerous throughout the early centuries. In Iraq, for example, the insurgent Muslim armies of the seventh century discovered a Christian population organised under a hierarchy of priests, bishops and metropolitans, with many churches and monastic foundations. In the early years at least, Muslims were outnumbered by adherents of their sister faith, so, impelled by pragmatic considerations, though with support from the Qur'an, they quickly effected a *modus vivendi* with their new subjects in which the most significant feature was uneasy acceptance.<sup>1</sup> This was the background against which religious exchanges took place, and it is worth briefly sketching it out.

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1 On relationships between the Muslim conquerors and their Christian subjects cf. L. E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia*, Cambridge 1933; A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their non-Muslim Subjects*, London 1930.

In the early centuries of Islam, from about 700 to 1000 AD, Christians could move through Umayyad and 'Abbasid society with some ease. In fact, the Christians who had previously been under Byzantine rule quite probably found they now fared better than before. They were, of course, required to pay the traditional taxes laid down for subject peoples and were not allowed to bear arms, but in return they enjoyed protected-status as *Dhimmis*.<sup>1</sup> And they appear, in the main, to have benefitted from this position, for one hears of Christian secretaries who were so influential upon the caliph that they were able to turn imperial policy to their own ends, of Christian physicians whom the caliphs preferred to Muslims, and of financiers and jewellers who were patronised by the nobles and courtiers of the time.

In addition, Christians provided an important service to Islam and future generations by transmitting the thought of the ancient world. The House of Wisdom set up in Baghdad under the early 'Abbasid caliphs was entirely staffed by Christians engaged upon tasks of translating philosophical and other texts from Greek and Syriac. The best known among them, Hunayn Ibn Ishaq, is recognised as an accomplished translator who made totally reliable and often inspired Arabic versions of the originals. He and his colleagues must have enjoyed the most agreeable working conditions and rewards, and must have known that their efforts were appreciated by the Muslim intellectuals for whom they worked.<sup>2</sup>

But, of course, life under Islamic rule was not always easy for Christians. Technically, they were expected to conduct themselves according to the principles laid down in the so-called Convention of 'Umar, which was ascribed to the second caliph. This was enforced from time to time as political expediency required, and Christians would then be made to wear distinctive dress, be forbidden to conduct their services publicly or make their call to worship, and most serious of all would see any new churches they had built destroyed. There is some evidence that the tightest restrictions coincided with periods of political instability, which suggests that Christians may have been used as scapegoats by nervous governments.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately they were not often enforced methodically or for long periods, though the caliph al-Mutawakkil does seem to have applied them with unusual severity in the years around 850 AD (235 and 238 AH). In addition to destroying new churches and ordering Christians to wear yellow markings on their clothes, he ordered Christian graves to be obliterated, Christian officials to be dismissed from state service, Christian children to

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1 Cf. A. Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam*, Beirut 1958; D. C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll-Tax in Early Islam*, Cambridge, Mass. 1950; Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi, Jews and Christians under Islam*, London 1985.

2 Cf. *Arabica*, 21, 1974, pp 229ff, a fascicule dedicated to Hunayn and his activities.

3 Fattal, *Statut*, gives examples.

be removed from Muslim schools, and images of devils to be placed on the doors of Christian homes.<sup>1</sup> Al-Mutawakkil was a cruel fanatic, but the fact that his measures were hardly ever repeated in early Islamic times testified to the normally lenient treatment Christians received.

In some measure Christians may even have deserved al-Mutawakkil's harshness, if a letter written a few years before his accession by the stylist and polymath Abu 'Uthman al-Jahiz is to be believed. In his opening paragraphs al-Jahiz complains about what amount to Christian abuses of the tolerance shown them within the Muslim empire: they take advantage of their respected positions as theologians, doctors, astronomers, secretaries, perfumers and money changers, they ignore official edicts, avoid taxes, poke fun at Islamic traditions, corrupt the minds of young and weak-minded Muslims, and show scant regard for those among whom they live.<sup>2</sup> He makes a telling list of criticisms, which even allowing for exaggeration, points to the Christians as a group on the margin of society who compensated by regarding themselves as socially and intellectually elite and their neighbours as inferior. It is not surprising that Muslim resentment at what would be seen as haughtiness should occasionally boil over into anger.

Against this somewhat unstable though generally tolerant social background relations of a distinctly religious nature were characterised by the contrasting qualities of respect and vehement disagreement. In social terms, the Christian denominations were allowed to order their own affairs, and the religious hierarchy was permitted to go about its business. One author gives a vivid description which may date from as early as 850 AD, though is probably slightly later, of a Christian metropolitan openly processing through the Karkh market in Baghdad on his way to debate with a Muslim followed by a great entourage of bishops and priests all wearing their black habits with their hoods pulled up over their heads, a striking and impressive spectacle. And Muslims commonly attended feast-day services in churches to witness the drama of the liturgy being enacted. The 'Abbasids sought control of the churches to some extent by bringing all denominations under the overall responsibility of the Nestorian patriarch of Baghdad whose election they supervised. But even then they allowed the patriarch great discretion in the day to day running of affairs, and may even have looked on him as a sort of counterpart to themselves as leader of a religious community. This may seem an overstatement, but it certainly goes some way in explaining why, for example, the caliph al-Mahdi spent two days in dialogue with the patriarch Timothy<sup>3</sup>, and why in the court of

1 Abu Ja'far al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, transl. Ye'or, *Dhimmi*, pp 185f.

2 *Al-Radd 'ala al-Nasara*, transl. J. Finkel, 'A Risala of al-Jahiz', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 47, 1927, pp 311-34.

3 A. Mingana, 'The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 12, 1928, pp 137-298. H. Putman, *L'Eglise et l'Islam sous Timothée I (730-823)*, Beirut, 1985, sets this in its historical and ecclesiastical background.

al-Ma'mun Christian patriarchs, together with leaders of the Jews, Zoroastrians and others, debated questions of religion under the leadership and guidance of the caliph himself.

These are all signs that Muslims held Christians in considerable respect. But turning to the specific matter of exchange between them, the records of the theological debates they held demonstrate considerable impatience and exasperation with teachings that seemed full of contradiction and absurdity.

### Theological Debate

The history of debate between Muslim and Christians begins with the Prophet himself. The Qur'an contains a substantial amount of teaching about Christianity, some of it portraying the faith favourably, but much of it warning against mistakenness. The greatest bulk of this teaching concerns the nature of Christ, who it repeatedly asserts was no more than a human warner. He was a prophet, and was granted many miraculous signs by God, but he was no greater than prophets before and after him, a human being and servant of the one transcendent divinity.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, Muslims were influenced very deeply by this teaching and rarely demonstrated any independent estimation of Christianity, or indeed thought it necessary to do so. Thus, when they met with Christians to explore and compare their beliefs they already had with them information and an attitude that were largely formulated.

Records of meetings and inter-changes survive from Umayyad times onwards. Among the earliest the best known include the works of John of Damascus and Theodor Abu Qurra,<sup>2</sup> and later the long defence of Christianity which Timothy I gave before the caliph al-Mahdi in about 781 AD. But the first works by Muslims which survive in quantity date from the beginning of the ninth century when the Mu'tazilite theologians of Basra and Baghdad were laying the foundations of Islamic systemic theology.<sup>3</sup> Almost all the Muslim masters are known to have written refutations of Christianity, although only a handful have come down intact. Those that have indicate that one of the major themes of polemic at this time was the nature of Christ, the theme raised repeatedly in the Qur'an.

Polemicists attacked this teaching from a number of angles. Firstly, with respect to the nature of God, they showed that the one divine being could not have a son or an equal and still be fully divine. For to have a son would bring him into the condition of humans, and to have an equal would mean a diminution of his godliness. Arguments of this kind are based upon the

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1 The relevant passages are set out and discussed in G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, London 1965.

2 Cf. D. J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, Leiden 1972; A.-T. Khoury, *Les théologiens byzantins et l'Islam*, Louvain 1969.

3 W. M. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Edinburgh, 1985, traces early Islamic intellectual developments.

specifically Islamic assumption about the nature of God as incomparable and unique, though polemicists rarely if ever made explicit references to the Qur'an, preferring instead appeals to unbiased common sense or occasionally the tenets of Greek philosophy.

Secondly, with respect to evidence about Jesus himself, they argued that he was unquestionably human and nothing more. Such known facts as that he grew up from child to man and suffered death, that he was limited in knowledge, that according to one polemicist he pared his nails, and that he regarded himself as inferior to God, were all cited to support this contention. Many polemicists compared the miracles performed by Jesus with those of Old Testament prophets and sometimes Muhammad, discovering ingenious parallels for his miracles of feeding, walking on the water, reviving the dead and healing, and his miraculous birth.

A second major theme in 9th century polemic was that of the incoherence of Christian teaching. Muslims referred time and again to the problems attendant upon the Incarnation, echoing critics of former times by asking how a being could be both divine and human, how God could die, how he could control the universe if he was on earth, and so on. They also attacked the Trinity as a teaching riddled with inconsistencies: on a purely numerical level, three cannot be one; on a philosophical level, three identical beings must include within themselves species, types or classes, and hence must be composite; and on a theological level, the persons could not be determinants of the actual being of God himself and so must be accidental and not identical with the absolute reality of the divine being.<sup>1</sup>

These brief examples show that in addition to the Qur'an Muslims obtained some direct information about what Christians themselves believed and taught, which raises the question of sources. Naturally, with Christian leaders and theologians living more or less freely in Muslim society it was not difficult for polemicists to obtain whatever information they required. Many of them, in fact, had some idea of the differences between the teachings of the main denominations they encountered, the

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1 Among reports of debates, cf. in addition to the works of John of Damascus, Timothy and al-Jahiz cited above, A. Mingana, *The Book of Religion and Empire*, Manchester 1922, (a translation of an apology for Islam by the convert 'Ali al-Tabari); M. Muir, *The Apology of al-Kindi*, London 1887, (a summary of a savage ninth or tenth century attack on Islam and the Prophet); A. Périer, 'Un traité de Yahya ben 'Adi', *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 22, 1920-21, pp 3-21, (a Christian refutation of the attack on the Trinity by the Muslim philosopher Abu Yusuf al-Kindi, containing quotations of Kindi's own work); S. M. Stern, 'Abd al-Jabbar's Account of how Christ's Religion was falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs', *Journal of Theological Studies*, new series, 19, 1968, pp 128-185, (a tenth century Muslim's summary of early Christian history); D. Thomas, 'Two Muslim-Christian Debates from the Early Shi'ite Tradition', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 33, 1988, pp 53-80, (two supposedly early dialogues between Christian and Muslim leaders).

Nestorians, the Jacobites or Monophysites, and the Chalcedonians or Melkites. It is not at all unlikely they received much through direct exchanges, though it does not appear that knowledge of Christian writings, and especially of the Bible, was at all widespread, for most of the polemical texts at our disposal do not contain many quotations from the Bible and the majority of polemicists seem to have been satisfied with a handful of well-known proof texts. Most popular of all was John 17:20, 'I go to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God', an obvious favourite because it seems to make no distinction between Christ in his relationship to God and the disciples in theirs.

Information was also channelled through converts from Christianity to Islam. The best known from early 'Abbasid times was 'Ali b. Rabban al-Tabari, a physician who converted at the great age of 70 and then proceeded to compose a refutation of Christianity and also a long apology for Islam in which he showed from proof texts collected from throughout the Old and New Testaments that the Bible contained numerous prophecies of the coming of Muhammad (one of the few works to demonstrate deep knowledge of Christian Scripture).<sup>1</sup> It is likely that he and many other converts were important sources of reliable information about points embarrassing to Christianity.

### **More Sympathetic Assessments of Christian Doctrine**

Such knowledge as they obtained, however, did not soften the polemicists' attitudes which nearly always followed the Qur'an in condemning Christianity as illogical and incoherent. But there were some notable exceptions of Muslims who were deeply interested in Christian teachings. It may be useful to cite the instances of two theologians active in the early ninth century who made valiant efforts to understand the faith of their cousins. They are both rather shadowy figures who are attractive in their mysteriousness: the first is 'Abdallah b. Sa'id Ibn Kullab (died about 854 AD) who was an opponent of many of the rationalist theses of the Mu'tazilites.

Ibn Kullab is best known for his views about the divine attributes, the names of God found in the Qur'an, such as knowledge, power and life. The Mu'tazilites held that the attributes did not have any distinct reality, and were only means of describing the being of God, so that to say God had knowledge meant for them not that he possessed a really existent attribute distinct from himself but simply that he was knowing. In opposition, Ibn Kullab taught that the attributes did have some distinctive reality, so that to say that God was knowing meant for him that he possessed knowledge really as an existent determinant of his being. It can be seen that on the one hand the Mu'tazilites sought to maintain the absolute oneness of God and rejected any suggestion that his being was composite, while on the other

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1 Ed. Mingana, *The Book of Religion and Empire* (this work has sometimes been thought a forgery but is undoubtedly genuine, cf. D. Thomas in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 69, 1986, pp 1-7).

Ibn Kullab was concerned to explain in theological terms the teaching of the Qur'an about what God was in his actual being. He risked the divine unity in order to make God approachable; they risked any possibility of comprehending him in order to safeguard his uniqueness. But like his opponents, Ibn Kullab was aware that the existence of real attributes as discrete entities within the being of God might entail plurality or composition, so he coined the formula: the attributes are neither God nor other than him.<sup>1</sup> These apparently simple face-saving words can ultimately be traced to Christian circles where they served in explanations of the relationship between the hypostases and the substance in the Trinitarian Godhead. And more importantly, they were equally employed for this same purpose by Christian contemporaries of Ibn Kullab himself. It is known that Ibn Kullab had close connections with Christians in Baghdad and also that he was accused of holding views suspiciously similar to theirs. So it is not at all unlikely that he made use of this formula in the full knowledge that it was very close, if not identical, to formulas used at that time by Christians to explain the Trinity. In doing this he did not move outside the Islamic intellectual milieu, but he must have reflected sympathetically upon teachings about the Trinity in order to see the value of this explanation for his own purposes.

The other Muslim theologian who appears to have taken more than a passing interest in Christianity is Abu 'Isa al-Warraq (died 860 AD) a Shi'ite who was condemned as a dualist and heretic. He is one of the most intriguing early Muslim thinkers, since he seems to have been genuinely interested in the teachings of other religions purely for their own sakes. Although nearly all of his works have been lost later writers inform us that he gave authoritative accounts of Zoroastrianism and other dualist religions, Indian religions, Judaism, and Christianity. Some of these became the stock sources of later authors who clearly considered them definitive. Abu 'Isa even criticised his own faith, and incensed his fellow Muslims by suggesting that Muhammad was a magician and that the Qur'an was not the literary miracle it was generally taken to be. No wonder he died in prison and his writings were condemned.

The one work that survives is his refutation of Christianity, an exhaustive series of arguments against the Trinity and Incarnation.<sup>2</sup> Abu 'Isa indicates how well he knew his opponents' beliefs by the subtlety with which he exposes the contradictions between them. And he demonstrates it most impressively in the opening exposition, where he presents the different teachings of the major denominations in meticulous detail. Thus, for example, he distinguishes between the Trinitarian doctrines of the Nestorians and Jacobites, that 'the hypostases are the substance and the

1 On Ibn Kullab and this whole debate cf. J. van Ess, 'Ibn Kullab und die Mihna' *Oriens*, 18-19, 1967, pp 92-142.

2 There is no satisfactory account of Abu 'Isa easily available in published form.

substance is the hypostases', and of the Melkites, that 'the hypostases are the substance but the substance is not the hypostases'. Elsewhere, he gives a series of metaphors which were used to explain how the divine Son became incarnate, that, for example, he put on the human body as a garment, and that his presence in the body was like the imprint of a seal in wax, or the reflection of a face in a mirror. He also gives a version of the Nicene Creed and describes the controversies from which it originated, and even discusses the correct pronunciation of the names of some minor sects. The information he distils into the dozen pages of this description must have come from a range of sources which he scrutinised over a period of time. This information is not all used in the arguments that come after, and is most probably gathered together because Abu 'Isa took pure pleasure in discovering it.

### **Establishing the Truth of Muslim Doctrine**

Abu 'Isa's inquiring interest and Ibn Kullab's open receptivity are not typical of the time, but still they indicate that not all Muslims dismissed Christian doctrines without serious study. However, those who did so had some excuse for their action, because one of the main reasons for engaging in polemic was not to refute opponents but quite the reverse: it was really to support the teachings of Islam. Refutation of Christian doctrines were regularly made by those who were engaged in explaining and expounding Islamic doctrines, so it is reasonable to look for a relationship between the two concerns. What this was becomes clear with the appearance of the first systematic treatises of Islamic theology in the tenth century. For in these the refutations of Christian doctrines always occupy the same position, which is after the exposition of the native Islamic doctrine of God. In this position, they serve to illustrate how beliefs which diverged from the purity of the truth lead to the incoherent consequences of tritheism and divine-human confusions. Thus they adumbrate the correctness of doctrines based upon the Qur'an and warn against allowing error to gain entry through lack of intellectual rigour.

While this was not the only reason for engaging in polemic it was quite probably a major influence upon many of those who wrote about Christianity. And it explains why so many of the surviving polemical works lack naked hostility and have the courteous air of academic exercises. Their authors were really concerned with underlining the truth of Islam at the expense of deviant and decayed alternatives.

In this the influence of the Qur'an is pervasive. For the Muslim theologians were only articulating its teaching that Christians had corrupted the pristine revelation they were given, and had fallen into error and contentiousness. The Qur'an remained paramount even for the most rational of thinkers, who no matter what their acquaintance with the teachings of Christianity still followed the attitudes inculcated by Islam.



If any of these theologians had heard of Christians praying at the tomb of Ayyub al-Ansari they would, with the help of the Qur'an, have readily understood that the Christians did so out of a residual sense of what was right. Again they would have interpreted the action with the mixture of acceptance and distaste that characterised early relations between the faiths. But some of the more quizzical among them may have allowed themselves a superior chuckle, since in the rain the Byzantines received they would see a distinctly Muslim blessing. The word '*rahma*' represents both 'rain' and 'mercy' in Arabic, and would recall the epithets used for God throughout the Qur'an, *al-Rahman al-Rahim*.

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### **The Anvil Treasurer**

For the past three years or more, the Editorial Board has had the services of the Reverend David Brentnall as its treasurer. He intimated a year ago that he would wish to relinquish the post but in order to give support to the editor on his appointment has continued through 1988. Now he has been able to retire from the task and we thank him most warmly for his assiduous attention to our finances in this protracted period. At the same time we welcome Mr Mark Slater, who is preparing for ordination at Ridley Hall, and who has had business experience before entering on to his present training.

**George Marchant**